

Application of Biblical Material

During the period 1971–1982, whenever evangelicals addressed the problem of applying biblical material—statements, injunctions, and concepts—to twentieth-century Christian living, two questions dominated. What possibilities exist for applying biblical injunctions and statements of truth that are infused with cultural elements? And what guidelines are there for determining which biblical content is intended to establish moral, spiritual, and social norms and standards?

Mandates and Principles

Before looking at these areas, it would be well to note the four basic components of biblical imperatives: the practice or teaching advocated, the principle or meaning that the action expresses, the rationale for the action, and the cultural context in which the action takes place and is understood. The issue for evangelical interpreters was how to apply a specific mandate with a particular meaning in its ancient cultural context to a contemporary context where the same teaching might have a completely different meaning or no meaning at all. Is it possible to be precisely obedient to the original writer's commands when applying his direction in a contemporary setting?

R. C. Sproul presents four general approaches for applying biblical material which contains cultural elements.¹ Taking 1 Corinthians 11:2–16 as an example, he identifies as the meaning the injunction that women are to be submissive to men. The form or practice for expressing that principle is the wearing of a head covering, which was a cultural sign of that submission. One approach, unacceptable to most evangelicals, would treat both form and meaning as custom, as culturally relative to Paul's time and therefore without continuing binding authority.²

A second approach treats both form and meaning as principle, and therefore eternally valid. Walter Kaiser says that this is often true of biblical content. The modern application, then, would keep both the meaning and the cultural-historical expression of that meaning.³ Though evangelicals generally recognized that at any given place in Scripture both form and meaning could be potentially normative, in practice they showed a great deal of selectivity. Some materials could be applied easily and directly; other passages had to be adjusted. Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart note that those who deny that cultural values are relative do not succeed very well in adopting first-century culture. It is extremely difficult to be consistent because "there is no such thing as a divinely ordained culture."⁴ Evangelicals were ambivalent about consistently following this second approach.

A third approach focuses on the principle in the directive. Richard Longenecker asserts that Scripture's declared principles, or meanings, have continuing validity, but the practices, or forms, that implement them are only "signposts at the beginning of a journey which point out the path to be followed if we are to reapply that same gospel in our day." In his view, contemporary interpreters need to undertake a project of reapplication rather than adopting biblical practices. The biblical writers only began to work out the implications of the gospel for the situations they encountered; we must "endeavor to follow the path that they marked out for the application of those gospel principles, seeking to carry out their work in fuller and more significant ways."⁵

1. R. C. Sproul, *Knowing Scripture* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Inter-Varsity, 1977), 106.

2. See, however, James D. G. Dunn, "The Authority of Scripture According to Scripture," *Churchman* 96 (1982): 217.

3. Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., "Legitimate Hermeneutics," in *Inerrancy*, ed. Norman L. Geisler (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979), 141.

4. Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth: A Guide to Understanding the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 65; see also Henry A. Virkler, *Hermeneutics: Principles and Processes of Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 222.

5. Richard N. Longenecker, *New Testament Social Ethics for Today* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 27–28; see also J. I. Packer, "Exposition on Biblical Hermeneutics," in *Hermeneutics, Inerrancy, and the Bible*, ed. Earl D. Radmacher and Robert D. Preus (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 912–13.

At Summit II on Hermeneutics (1982) of the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy, Robertson McQuilkin challenged this approach on the grounds that it is nowhere enunciated in Scripture. "To set aside any specific teaching of Scripture, allowing only the principle deduced from the particular(s) to be normative, is to impose an extra-biblical notion and violate the authority of Scripture."⁶ Alan Johnson, on the other hand, expressed support for Longenecker's approach, suggesting that it allows the whole of biblical phenomena to instruct us and "includes the necessary recognition that language and practice are culturally related and are *not* universal at certain levels of expression."⁷

The final approach holds that both the principle and the practice are normative, though the specific cultural expression of the practice may vary. In the case of 1 Corinthians 11, the principle of submission is still in force and the symbolic act of covering the head is specifically prescribed. However, the article for covering may vary from culture to culture.

Henry Virkler, focusing specifically on modification, points out that "since a given behavior in one culture may have a different meaning in another culture, it may be necessary to change the behavioral expression of a scriptural command in order to translate the principle behind it from one culture and time to another."⁸ Walter Kaiser notes that there is "scriptural precedent for such cultural replacements." Paul, for example, replaces the death penalty (Lev. 20:11; see also 18:7) with excommunication (1 Cor. 5) as the punishment for incest. "The cultural *form* of a command may be modified even though the principle of that form remains unchanged for all subsequent readers."⁹

It is clear that evangelicals tackled the problems of application with vigor, and yet the decade of the seventies was characterized by a growing tentativeness. It appears that the unspoken consensus concerning which biblical commands were cultural and which were transcultural had begun to break down.

R. C. Sproul represents a case in point, for after advancing with precision the four approaches for application, he withdraws into uncertainty when confronted with the problem of stating which is most pleasing to

6. J. Robertson McQuilkin, "Problems of Normativeness in Scripture: Cultural Versus Permanent," in *Hermeneutics, Inerrancy*, 228; see also Richard N. Longenecker, "The Hermeneutics of New Testament Social Ethics" (unpublished paper, n.d.).

7. Alan F. Johnson, "A Response to Problems of Normativeness in Scripture: Cultural Versus Permanent," in *Hermeneutics, Inerrancy*, 270.

8. Virkler, *Hermeneutics*, 224; Grant R. Osborne adds another circumstance in which commands may be modified. "Those commands that have proven detrimental to the cause of Christ in later cultures must be reinterpreted" ("Hermeneutics and Women in the Church," *JETS* 20 [1977]: 340).

9. Kaiser, "Legitimate Hermeneutics," 142; see also I. Howard Marshall, "How Do We Interpret the Bible Today?" *Themelios* 5, no. 2 (1980): 11; J. Julius Scott, Jr., "Some Problems in Hermeneutics for Contemporary Evangelicals," *JETS* 22 (1979): 75.

God: "I certainly do not know the final answer to the question."¹⁰ J. Julius Scott was also frank to admit that very little had been done to distinguish between those commands based on norms that transcend culture and those that are culturally conditioned. Carl Henry summed up the situation: "The problem of biblical content and cultural context is rapidly becoming a central concern in current evangelical discussions of Scripture, since more and more theologians hold that the New Testament writers in some respects teach as doctrine what in fact reflects the cultural milieu in which they live. . . . To distinguish the supercultural from the cultural is a fundamental concern of hermeneutics."¹¹ The question then becomes, What are the guidelines for determining what is truly normative in Scripture?

Guidelines for Normativeness

The probing and deliberations of scholars during this period established five basic criteria for determining which biblical content is normative: (1) similarity in situations, (2) the nature and rationale of the directive, (3) the form of the directive, (4) the analogy of faith, and (5) the intent of the author.

Similarity in Situations

Obviously, striking similarities between first-century and twentieth-century situations give impetus for applying biblical commands. "Whenever we share comparable particulars (i.e., similar specific life situations) with the first-century setting, God's Word to us is the same as His Word to them."¹²

By the same token, great cultural differences, and sometimes subtle ones, may indicate that directives set forth in cultural terms are no longer in effect.¹³ For example, sufficient cultural difference to neutralize a precept may exist when the first-century situation does not and is not likely to occur in the twentieth century. Great cultural difference is also present when the scriptural first-century issue is no longer an issue in the twentieth century. In addition, significant cultural differences may be present that are not immediately obvious.¹⁴ A directive might be based on cultural circum-

10. Sproul, *Knowing Scripture*, 107-8.

11. Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation, and Authority*, 6 vols. (Waco, Tex.: Word, 1976-1979), 4:63, 57.

12. Fee and Stuart, *How to Read the Bible*, 60.

13. Gordon D. Fee, "Genre of New Testament Literature and Biblical Hermeneutics," in *Interpreting the Word of God Today*, ed. Samuel J. Schultz and Morris A. Inch (Chicago: Moody, 1976), 113-14.

14. Fee and Stuart, *How to Read the Bible*, 60, 68; Edwin M. Yamauchi, "Christianity and Cultural Differences," *CT* 16 (1971): 903.

stances which, though not explicitly stated in the text, are precisely what gave meaning and purpose at the time the teaching was written. For example, Is scriptural proscription against women as ministers no longer valid now that women have more educational opportunities to equip themselves for church leadership? Is head covering still required for women, or is decency of dress shown today in some other way?

As could be expected, numerous evangelical scholars cautioned against making similarity between cultures the test for normativeness.¹⁵ Because societies and cultures are the product of sinful human beings, Scripture's role is to challenge a culture's values and standards of behavior. When certain principles are no longer at issue, it may be because the whole of society has accepted a practice or an attitude that is against God's will as revealed in Scripture. Twentieth-century ideas and practices concerning divorce spring immediately to mind.

The Nature and Rationale of the Directive

A different approach was suggested by those scholars who undertook to distinguish the essential moral and theological material in Scripture from the nonmoral and nontheological content that is wholly tied to a cultural situation and hence is not timeless in itself.¹⁶ There is no authority in a directive which was the only option in a given first-century cultural situation. It is teaching that transcends the cultural biases of both the author and the readers that is normative.¹⁷ Paul's teaching on unity in Christ, which supersedes ethnic, sexual, and socioeconomic distinctions (Gal. 3:28), transcends the cultural biases of the first century and is a clear example of a true norm.

One way of getting at the inherently moral and theological material is to explore the rationale with which it is presented. One recurring rationale is an appeal to the creation order and to God's relationship with people as people. Viewed in such a light, Jesus' directive concerning divorce (Matt. 19:6) is normative and binding for all time. These "creation ordinances are normative unless explicitly modified by later biblical revelation."¹⁸

15. Robin E. Nixon, "The Authority of the New Testament," in *New Testament Interpretation: Essays on Principles and Methods*, ed. I. H. Marshall (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 346; Harold Lindsell, "Biblical Infallibility from the Hermeneutical and Cultural Perspectives," *BS* 133 (1976): 312-18. H. Dermot McDonald expresses this same concern with reference to the Christian message. It may lose its distinctiveness when totally reinterpreted in terms of the cultural vogue, "the shibboleths of the hour" ("Theology and Culture: An Evangelical Correlation," in *Toward a Theology for the Future*, ed. Clark H. Pinnock and David F. Wells [Carol Stream, Ill.: Creation House, 1971], 254).

16. Fee, "Genre of New Testament Literature," 113; Scott, "Some Problems," 75.

17. Osborne, "Hermeneutics and Woman," 339-40; Fee and Stuart, *How to Read the Bible*, 68.

18. Sproul, *Knowing Scripture*, 111; Kaiser, "Legitimate Hermeneutics," 143; John Jefferson Davis, "Some Reflections on Galatians 3.28, Sexual Roles, and Biblical Hermeneutics," *JETS* 19 (1976): 206.

A second rationale lies in the nature of God. Scriptural directives against murder, thievery, lying, and similar offenses are based upon God's unchanging nature (Gen. 9:6; see also Exod. 20:1-20). Such commands have permanent relevance for all believers in all times.¹⁹ The same holds true for prohibitions against pagan cultural practices; they are an offense to God's moral nature. Walter Kaiser makes the point that even in our contemporary culture such practices as bestiality, homosexuality, transvestism, and public nudity are forbidden. They offend the society of human beings made in God's image. It follows that Christ in his person, nature, and action also provides the basis for evaluating the authority of directives. The instruction for conduct in marriage in Ephesians 5:22-33 becomes unquestionably binding when seen as a reflection of Christ's relation to the church.

God's redemptive activity in the world provides a third rationale. In his saving activity, God enters into a covenant relationship with human beings that is uniquely transcultural, a covenant involving particular obligations and behavior patterns. These are much more than transitory, adaptable cultural expressions of eternal principles. As John Jefferson Davis puts it, "These patterns are understood as essential to a positive, dynamic, and missionary-oriented thrust toward secular culture." He contends that there is a discernible Christian ideology which must be integrated in distinctive, redemptively based forms of social life.²⁰

Such a contention is based on the biblical understanding that God, working through the structures of human freedom, sovereignly and providentially controls all cultural development. He has the capacity to choose cultural patterns, whether they are Old Testament patriarchal structures of society or marriage regulations transformed by Jesus Christ (Matt. 5:27-32). Since these cultural patterns are grounded in the creation order, the culturally conditioned character of a biblical command becomes a subsidiary matter.

In critiquing the matter of rationale, Robertson McQuilkin sees the need to establish where in Scripture such criteria have been explicitly stated. He views the matter of rationale as an extrabiblical principle imported into the application process, thereby undermining biblical authority. Furthermore, the criteria cannot be applied to all explicit teachings in Scripture, for not all have a discernible rationale, nor can it be demonstrated that all are moral or theological. This means that some normative teachings would not be discovered, for they fail these tests.²¹ Alan Johnson counters that, though Scripture may not explicitly establish these criteria, the biblical point of view,

19. Kaiser, "Legitimate Hermeneutics," 142.

20. Davis, "Some Reflections," 207 n. 19; see also idem, *Foundations of Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 276-79.

21. McQuilkin, "Problems of Normativeness," 228-29.

taken as a whole, does. He finds them not only workable, but helpful in avoiding "extreme cultural fundamentalism."²²

The Form of the Directive

A third guideline is the directive's form. As J. Julius Scott suggests, if it is a precise command stated in universal terms, then it is normative. If it is "case law," the application of an unstated principle to a specific situation, then the specific application is not binding, but the principle is. If the principle is stated explicitly elsewhere in Scripture, then we can identify the culturally expressed material as a specific application of the principle.²³

The Analogy of Faith

The hermeneutical principle of the analogy of faith becomes a fourth guideline. Scripture is best interpreted by Scripture, and this principle can show whether a command is normative. First, there is the matter of repetition. Roy Zuck contends that those situations, commands, or principles that are repeatable, continuous, and unrevoked, that pertain to other theological subjects, and that are repeated elsewhere in Scripture are normative and may be transferred directly for application.²⁴ Second, there is the matter of proportion and harmony with the larger context. A comparison of subject matter will either extend or limit the application and hence indicate the continuing authority of a given command. If the command is linked to the central core of the Bible's message or the central purposes of a given writer, then it should be viewed as normative. A teaching that is properly viewed as binding will be in harmony with the general message of the biblical writer and of Scripture as a whole.

Harold Lindsell considers the scriptural command concerning a wife's submission to her husband to be just such a norm. He asserts that this teaching is "so integral a part of the total presentation [of Ephesians and Colossians] that its nullification would impair or imperil the other major teachings of these epistles."²⁵

22. Johnson, "Response to Problems," 272.

23. Scott, "Some Problems," 75. Osborne asserts that redaction criticism could be of use in distinguishing the primitive teaching of the early Christian tradition from the later temporal application to specific problems ("Hermeneutics and Women," 339).

24. Roy B. Zuck, "Application in Biblical Hermeneutics and Exposition," in *Walvoord: A Tribute*, ed. Donald K. Campbell (Chicago: Moody, 1982), 30; note Fee's guideline that a normative command should be part of uniform New Testament witness on the point ("Hermeneutics and Common Sense," in *Inerrancy and Common Sense*, ed. Roger Nicole and J. Ramsey Michaels [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980], 174).

25. Lindsell, "Biblical Infallibility," 314.

Kenneth Kantzer, on the other hand, disputes the lasting authority of such passages as 1 Corinthians 11, 14, and 1 Timothy 2 in matters of a woman's role in the church. "If we were to universalize [the] prohibitions [of 1 Tim. 2:11-12 and 1 Cor. 14], we would extend the passages beyond the scope the apostle intended. It would conflict with other Scriptures, Paul's own clear statements in Corinthians, and his general teaching. . . . [Those who prohibit women's ordination] fail to see exactly the total thrust of Scripture in this matter."²⁶

The concept of the larger context can also be employed in the framework of progressive revelation.²⁷ Some interpreters argue that unless a biblical injunction is explicitly modified or done away with by later biblical revelation, the injunction remains in effect; that is, only Scripture can limit or modify the authority of Scripture.²⁸ Other interpreters contend that "all of the Old Testament law is still the Word of God for use even though it is not still the command of God to us."²⁹ In this view, the Old Testament law is the old covenant whose obligations expired with the coming of Christ (Luke 16:16-17; Rom. 6:14-15); consequently, unless an Old Testament precept is restated or reinforced in the New Testament, it is no longer directly binding on God's people.

McQuilkin takes strong exception to this approach as being at odds with Christ's and the early apostles' view of the Old Testament as the authoritative Word of God. It would eliminate from consideration prohibitions that are not repeated in the New Testament, such as those against bestiality and rape. Though he acknowledges that there are problems in interpreting and applying the Old Testament, to disallow its normative nature "is certainly an attack on the authority of the majority of Scripture."³⁰

The Intent of the Author

The final criterion is the intent of the original author. In uncovering this element, the interpreter can make a judgment concerning the extent of application. J. Julius Scott observes that when an author gives directives dealing with local customs or a particular situation, these injunctions may not be normative, though the principles behind them are. Indeed, the

26. Kenneth S. Kantzer, "Women's Role in Church and Family," *CT* 25 (1981): 254-55.

27. Eugene A. Wilson would have us ask these questions as we apply Old Testament narrative: Where in God's redemptive history do we find ourselves in relation to the people of the narrative? What added perspective of God's nature and work do we have as people living after Christ? Does God relate to us in the same way? ("The Homiletical Application of Old Testament Narrative Passages," *Trinity Journal* 7 [1978]: 89).

28. Sproul, *Knowing Scripture*, 110; Lindsell, "Biblical Infallibility," 313.

29. Fee and Stuart, *How to Read the Bible*, 139.

30. McQuilkin, "Problems of Normativeness," 230. Alan Johnson ("Response to Problems," 272) agrees with McQuilkin.

interpreter should be alert to "other indicators of the presence of historically or situationally controlled materials."³¹ Scott gives as examples of directives that are situationally or culturally conditioned 2 Timothy 4:11 ("Get Mark and bring him with you") and Romans 16:16 ("Greet one another with a holy kiss"). R. C. Sproul recommends that the interpreter distinguish between cultural institutional structures (such as the monarchy) that Scripture simply recognizes to exist and those like monogamous marriage that the Bible institutes and endorses.³²

Historical narratives, Gordon Fee contends, present many opportunities for distinguishing which factors are simply reported and which are normative.³³ Here again, the author's intention is the key. In Acts one may find incidental principles reflecting the author's theology. However, if they are not part of his basic message, they should not be given primary importance. For example, the strong Servant-Messiah Christology in the early preaching is incidental to Luke's overall purpose (Acts 3:26; 4:25, 30). Such incidental material may provide secondary support for what is taught elsewhere. Historical material does not become authoritative historical precedent unless the author intends it so, as is clearly the case in Jesus' and the apostles' two-stage experience: born of the Spirit, then baptized in the Spirit (Luke 1:35; 3:22; Acts 2:1-4). However, using the historical incident of Jesus' cleansing of the temple (Matt. 21:12-13) to justify selfish anger masquerading as righteous indignation is improper application, since selfish anger is not approved in Scripture.

Even patterns without normative foundation may have value for personal Christian experience. Where there are diverse patterns—for example, in the author's presentation of the relationships between conversion, baptism, and the coming of the Spirit (Acts 2:38-41; 8:17-18; 10:44-46; 19:6)—it is necessary to establish the pattern to be taken as binding. This can be done by finding where else in Scripture the principle behind the pattern is explicitly taught.

During the decade of the seventies no consensus was achieved in methods for uncovering the Bible's normative commands. This may explain why the dominant plea was for interpreters to address these issues, while interacting in a Christian manner with those with whom they may differ. R. C. Sproul called for humility in areas of uncertainty where it is hard to decide whether the biblical content is binding. Gordon Fee asked for charity, forgiveness, and open communication between those of differing opinions.³⁴

31. Scott, "Some Problems," 75.

32. Sproul, *Knowing Scripture*, 109.

33. Fee, "Genre of New Testament Literature," 117-19; see also idem, "Hermeneutics and Historical Precedent—A Major Problem in Pentecostal Hermeneutics," in *Perspectives on the New Pentecostalism*, ed. Russell P. Spittler (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1976), 118-33.

34. Fee, "Hermeneutics and Common Sense," 176.

In suggesting how to handle uncertainty in a way that balances the interpreter's tentativeness with commitment to a fully authoritative Scripture, Sproul counsels that overscrupulousness may be wise for a mandate of uncertain authority. Yet the interpreter must stop short of unnecessarily binding the conscience of another. This means, Sproul counsels, that the interpreters must do their analytical homework before making absolute statements about normative content.³⁵

35. Sproul, *Knowing Scripture*, 111-12.

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